

October 13, 2013

The National Presbyterian Church

## **TEN COMMANDMENTS:**

### **Faithful Marriage**

Genesis 2:18-25; John 8:2-11

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Through the fall we are following a series in which we're looking together at the Ten Commandments: the commandments given by God through Moses to his ancient people Israel, 3,000-3,500 years ago, as they escaped from slavery and wandered through the desert on their way to the land promised to them by God. Commandment not just intended to help us develop our individual ethic and character; but commandments given to God's ancient people Israel so that they could build a *society together*, a society of love and justice and faithfulness which would reflect on earth as much of the kingdom of heaven as possible. Rules for the game of "Life Together."

We come this morning to the Seventh Commandment which tells us that we are "not to commit adultery." According to our Presbyterian tradition, this commandment has been understood as referring not only to the issue of adultery but to the whole issue of sexuality: all of this encompassed within the seventh commandment, just as issues of life and death and anger, for example, were encompassed within the commandment about murder (see Jesus, Matthew 5:21-26).

For example, if we go back four hundred years to what is called the Westminster Larger Catechism (which to this day is part of our PCUSA theological constitution), we read these words in Question 139.

*What are the sins forbidden in the Seventh Commandment? The sins forbidden in the Seventh Commandment, beside the neglect of the duties required, are adultery, fornication, rape, incest, sodomy and all unnatural lusts; all unclean imaginations, thoughts, purposes and affections; all corrupt or filthy communications or listening thereunto; wanton looks, impudent or light behavior, immodest apparel; prohibiting of lawful and dispensing with unlawful marriages; allowing, tolerating, keeping of 'stews' (which is an ancient word for brothels), and resorting to them; entangling vows of single life, undue delay of marriage; having more wives or husbands than one at the same time; unjust divorce, or desertion; idleness, gluttony, drunkenness, unchaste company; lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancings, stage plays; (remember this is the Elizabethan age) and all other provocations to, or acts of uncleanness, either in ourselves or others.*

Quite a list!! There's a lot here –which reminds us that questions of sexuality have blessed and plagued and confused humankind throughout history! You only need to go back a century or so in our country to see how things have changed. For example, if we go to the mid-1800's we discover that the laws relating to marriage were quite different in those days from our day. At that time, in the mid-1800's, the legal age for marriage was 11 or 12 for women and for men it was about the age 15.

There are records from Hempstead Harbor in NY from 1838 (see Wall Street Journal, February 25, 2004) which described the marriage of 15 year-old Edward Tappan to an 11 year-old (11 year-old!), Harriet Allen. All of this seems to be quite acceptable to the “Christian society” of the time – while at the same time in many states at that time, interracial marriage was illegal, as was marriage between slaves (and are we not still reaping the consequence of that law to our own day?), and as was marriage between many people with physical or mental disabilities.

So, given our own history in the United States, it really shouldn't be surprising that down to our own day, the permutations and combinations of issues and questions and problems and laws that affect us as a society with respect to sexuality — well they just seem to be limitless.

**ADULTERY.** There are issues, for example, as the Seventh Commandment directly implies, which have to do with adultery. The statistics vary on this, but conservative statistics are these that some 24% of married men and some 14% of married women have had some kind of an affair during their marriage which involves sex outside of the marriage bond. And that adultery (if you add those affairs which *do not* include explicit sexual intimacy) is broader than that. The figures sky rocket from there if you look at the number of folks looking for some form of personal intimacy – simply to be understood by someone of the other sex outside of marriage.

(*Myths of Marital Infidelity*, David A. Gershaw, Ph.D. web; Dr. Debbie Layton-Tholl, 2003; <http://members.aol.com/affairlady/ARTICLE.HTM>; also, see the Durex Global Sex Survey, 2005 [http://web.archive.org/web/20080430082451/http://www.durex.com/cm/gss2005Content.asp?intQid=943&intMenuOpen=](http://web.archive.org/web/20080430082451/http://www.durex.com/cm/gss2005Content.asp?intQid=943&intMenuOpen=;)); see also <http://www.examiner.com/article/marital-infidelity-the-exception-or-the-rule>

**DIVORCE.** Related, of course, to the issue of affairs and adultery is the painful issue of divorce which no doubt affects many of us who are here today. You know the statistics – that somewhere around 50% of all marriages end up in divorce (40% for first time marriages, less if parents have not been divorced; 60% for second, and 73% for third marriages, according to law firm, McKinley Irvin – see <http://www.mckinleyirvin.com/blog/divorce/32-shocking-divorce-statistics/>). The good news is that these figures seem to be in decline, but the reason for the decline is somewhat debated. Some people would argue that the reason for the decline is quite simply that not as many people are getting married as they use to! Instead of marriage, they are simply *cohabiting*, and so when they break up, the statistics can't be included in the official “divorce statistics” that are gathered. (*Myths of Marital Infidelity*, David A. Gershaw, Ph.D. see web; “U.S. Marriage Trends Stabilize in 1990s,” Cheryl Wetzstein, *The Washington Times*, October 21, 2003)

**COHABITATION.** In fact, cohabitation has become a major issue in our society. The most recent census in 2010 reported that there were some 15 million heterosexual persons cohabiting. That is an increase of 50% since 2000 and an increase of 1,500% (tenfold!) since 1960. Let me put it this way: Whereas in 1960, there were half a million cohabiting couples, in

the year 2010, there were 7.5 million. This is a massive change in our society for good or ill (and people of course debate whether it is for good or ill!). A massive impact on all of society.

- It has a massive impact on what we describe as family life.
- It has a massive impact on rearing children.
- It has a massive impact on education.

See the The National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia  
(<http://nationalmarriageproject.org/report-type/state-of-our-unions-2/>);

The Wikipedia article on “Cohabitation” provides good footnotes to current research.

See also, “*The Downside of Cohabiting before Marriage*,” NY Times, April 14, 2012, by Meg Jay

Issues of adultery and divorce and cohabitation are all on the forefront of the burner of society’s life today while often simmering in the background are the less tasteful or discussed issues of domestic abuse and real violence in the context of sexuality.

(see “The Perils of Playing House,” Psychology Today, August 2005).

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.** About twenty years ago, one study discovered that each year, domestic violence

*“is a major cause of serious injury to American women. An estimated 2-4 million women are beaten by husbands or boyfriends, more than are hurt in auto accidents, rapes or muggings. The FBI says that every four days, a woman is beaten to death by a man she knows well. Despite comfortable stereotypes, the victims are hardly limited to uneducated or disadvantage women. Many are from society’s upper echelons. At least 10% of professional men beat their wives.”* (That means it is going on in our congregation).

*“Abusive behavior can range from intense psychological intimidation, threats, limit physical freedom, withhold money or even kill family pets to bone-shattering physical violence.”* (Time, December 21, 1987, p.68)

To those who are here this morning, who are caught up in this or who know someone who is, the only words that need to be said are “Get out and get out now. Get help quickly.” And if you say to yourself, “It’s probably my fault, I feel guilty” please know that those words are lies from the devil: there is no justification, ever, for domestic violence.

So there are issues inside of marriage. There are issues outside of marriage. There are issues for adults and there are issues for children as well.

**CHILDREN.** With regards to children, UNICEF and the U.S. Department of Justice estimates that here in the United States between 100,000 and 300,000 children are involved in the sex trade. And other sources indicate that in Brazil and India, the figures are far more daunting. One Christian organization, the International Justice Mission, is involved in serving Christ in this difficult arena, and perhaps this is an area where our own congregation might become involved?

<http://www.ijm.org/sites/default/files/resources/Factsheet-Sex-Trafficking.pdf>  
[http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/civilrights/human\\_trafficking](http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/civilrights/human_trafficking)

## PRONOGRAPHY AND CHILD PORNOGRAPHY

And then you go on to the whole issue of pornography which is rampant in our society. “Enough is Enough” is an organization dedicated to making the internet safer for children and families.

Among other organizations, they have the support of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency prevention (part of USDOJ). Statistics on web pornography are notoriously hard to establish and easily exaggerated, but their statistics seem to have reasonable backing:

([www.enough.org](http://www.enough.org); see also [www.womansavers.com/infidelity-statistics.asp](http://www.womansavers.com/infidelity-statistics.asp);  
[www.internetfilterreview.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html](http://www.internetfilterreview.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html))

- A new porn site is made in the U.S. every 39 minutes
- Pornography is a \$13billion business in the United States and a \$97billion business worldwide.
- 15% of 12-17 year olds view pornography purposefully
- 70% have viewed pornography accidentally (but often repeatedly)
- 80% of these occasions are at home

And Texting (known now as Sexting!) has become a major vehicle of sharing sexually suggestive or explicit materials, which (and many of our young people do not realize this) when “out there” tend to be shared even more (despite promised not to forward). Once “sent” there is no way back.

For those who do view pornography, about 10% become addicted so that God’s God given instincts God given appetites something good has become all messed up and out of whack And this addiction is fed by the soft porn industry. It is fed by *Playboy*, by *Sports Illustrated*, by the visual media, by movies, by television, by sexually suggestive clothing and by what we now, since Super Bowl 38, call a “wardrobe malfunction!” which can occur at any time whatsoever, including the middle of a game of football!

SO, THIS IS, IN PART AT LEAST, a description of the world in which we live. And while to some, the prevalence of such activity is shocking, to others our ability to be outraged is more and more diminished and numbed not only by the sheer quantity of what we see, but also by our own failures and, in recent years, by the exposing of church leaders who frequently have led the way in condemning such things, often with venom and hatred, *while they themselves have been sinfully guilty!* The more it seems these things are condemned, the more likely it appears that the one condemning them is somehow involved himself.

**In such a mess, the question for me is:**

**whether or not anything definitive can be said, anything said that we can hold on to, and that can lead us forward.**

What I’d like to suggest this morning is that three texts of Scripture help us out here, profoundly, and that they can be summarized in two statements. The texts are

1. the Seventh Commandment in Exodus 20 (Deuteronomy 5)
2. combined with the story of the creation of man and woman in Genesis 2
3. and the teaching of Jesus in John 8

These three passages of Scripture combine to provide us an anchor in the midst of this unquestioned storm: a center to return to again and again.

That center, that norm is nothing new and it can be boiled down, in my opinion, to a couple of brief statements, the first of which is introductory but it is absolutely necessary. It

comes in the form of a question and it stems from our reading in John 8. The first is this: *Who are we to cast the first stone?*

**1. Who are we to cast the first stone?** That is to say, as we explore these issues from a biblical point of view, the very foundation of our exploration must be one of humility. Every single one of us is a sinner in the sight of God with enough failures and confusion and short comings and regrets in the area of sexuality or in some other area of life. No matter how righteous we are, no matter how well we have lived life, no matter how perfectly life has gone for us, we have no right to cast stones at others.

This clearly is the message of John 8 – the story of a woman caught in adultery whom others wanted to stone to death. You can hear their angry, self righteous screams: *Look at her! Look at her! Look at her! Look at them! Look at them! Look at them!* We single out one group or another. But Jesus says, “*The one who is without sin is the one to cast the first stone.*” And with that, all of those who wanted to condemn the woman left, one by one. ***Note that while he did not condemn her, he also did not condone her sin.*** He simply said, “*Woman, go. Sin no more.*” And she knew she had been loved. Jesus drives this same message home in the Sermon on the Mount when he speaks of the Seventh Commandment (in Matthew 5:27-30) and says that adultery is not just about explicit unfaithfulness, but it is even about the way we look at somebody else: the look of lust, as we look at somebody else in a way that is impure leaves every single one of us as a sinner. Which one of us has not looked at another person or thought some thought that puts us in that category?

So that, in the first place, all of our reflections on human sexuality as well as on many other things must begin (from a Christian point of view) on the platform of humility and not arrogance or self-righteousness. And that is the first statement: “*Who are we to cast the first stone?*” The second statement in “boiling these things down” is this:

**2. Nothing has changed from the very beginning.** Nothing has changed from the days of Genesis 2, that is God’s norm, God’s pattern, God’s center for the intimate expression of sexuality always has been and always will be “***one man and one woman, one flesh.***” One man, one woman, one flesh, covenanted together for life. Intimate sexuality expressed within the context of a covenant relationship, a promised relationship of faithfulness for life between a man and a woman. That is the center to which we must come back again and again, even though I know that to mention “the center” is to begin to raise all kinds of other questions and to leave many people with a deep sense of fear and guilt.

This morning, I’d just like to raise a couple of questions which arise when you posit that there is a Biblical center to which we must return repeatedly.

The first question is one that I have heard people ask and it is this: **What about those whose lives don’t fit the norm?** *What about those who for whatever reason (their fault or somebody else’s fault) their lives don’t fit the norm? Does God love them? Can God use them? Can God be at work within their lives? . . . in the life of someone whose life in one way, shape or form is not perhaps as they want it to be but that is just how it is?*

Well, when you ask that question and you look for the answer in the pages of Holy Scripture, reading the story of scripture as a whole, there is only one answer that I can give to that question and that answer is a resounding “YES! Of course, God can use us if we don’t fit the norm!”

- This is true for every single one of us because none of us fits the norm! The norm is Jesus Christ and all of us fall short of that standard, and yet God uses us.
- But to be specific when it comes to the issue of sexuality – in the pages of scripture, the clearest case of this has to do with polygamy. Look at the patriarchs of ancient Israel – Abraham (‘the friend of God’ James 2:23), Isaac and Jacob. Look at the kings of ancient Israel (especially ‘good’ kings like David and Solomon). Every single one of them was a polygamist. Not just a bigamist but a polygamist! And yet God loved them, and God befriended them, and God used them to touch the lives of more people than you or I could ever imagine.

God’s grace is simply enormous. His patience is remarkable. But then that raises another question.

The question in the second place is this: **If in fact God’s grace is remarkable, does that in the end mean that really in reality anything goes?** . . . so that the center is practically meaningless? Of course not! Rather, it means that when we leave the center, we come back to it again and again, even if we missed it.

In speaking about the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment a few weeks ago, I mentioned the image of Jesus as the legitimate “idol” that we are called to worship. Jesus is our perfect image or standard, not only for our view of God, but for our view of who we ourselves ought to be. He is our standard. We fail to reach the standard again and again, but that is no reason for throwing out the standard. Mother Teresa may approximate the standard, while we all wallow far below. Only when we get to heaven will we reach the goal. So why not lower the standard? No! If we lower the standard, we will aim low and we will hit lower. We hold the standard high without using it as a weapon, without laying a guilt trip on other people. We hold to it as the standard that God has given us in his Word, in Holy Scripture.

But the fact that we miss it means that yet once again in this area of ethical choices as in others, we have to live with a great deal of ambiguity – which, for the most part in our society, in this day of black and white, we don’t want to live with. We want to resolve all issues as simply “right or wrong,” when many issues have to do with weighing up *competing biblical values* for those, for all of us, who in some way, shape or form miss the central mark.

So that when it comes to the hottest of all issues in our day, **the issue of gay marriage**, I find myself *caught between competing biblical values*. On the one hand (as I have already said), I believe that the institution of marriage is absolutely sacred and that the term marriage should be used, and used only, for the relationship of a man and woman covenanted together forever (perhaps, these days, we now must simply call it “Christian Marriage”). But I also happen to believe that throughout all aspects of society there is foundational value in *people making promises to each other and keeping them*. That is, our society falls apart when we lose the theme of “covenant faithfulness,” a theme which goes through the Bible from beginning to end; society falls apart when people make promises and break them, or *do not make promises at all, so that*

*you never know where you stand with someone else.* Covenant commitment which is reflected in the Seventh Commandment is absolutely vital to the story of the Bible.

Indeed, it is absolutely vital to our understanding of our relationship with God who at times calls himself our husband, our spouse (see the book of Hosea), to whom we are related in a promised relationship. God is not fickle to us, not arbitrary or capricious. God has pledged, God has covenanted, God has promised to love us and to be faithful to us and on that we can depend, and he calls us in all relationships to be honest and true with one another. *How incredible that the sovereignly free and powerful creator God should risk himself, humble himself, and make a promise of steadfast marital love to me and you!*

So when it comes to a covenanted relationship between a person who is homosexual and another who is homosexual, and to a covenanted relationship that is either never made or is broken between one heterosexual and another heterosexual, I find myself somewhat confused! Which is “less Christian”?!

Indeed, if you were to ask me what is the “biggest threat” to the Christian view of marriage today (I’m not sure I like the question, but it is sometimes posed this way publically), without a doubt I would say to you that *I am far more bothered by what I see in heterosexual relationships than what I see in homosexual relationships.*

I am far more bothered by the massive growth of intimate relationships without covenant commitment: promiscuous relationships; pornographic relationships; the massive growth in cohabitation; relationships in which people are intimate but for one reason or another, they cannot make promises to each other; relationships into which people enter with their bodies but not with their heart and mind and strength and soul, or with their wills – relationships (I need to add) in which, and the evidence is growing, *women are far more likely to end up the losers than men.* And the great majority of these are not homosexual. They are heterosexual.

The Seventh Commandment is about a man and a woman.

The Seventh Commandment: *Do not commit adultery.*

A commandment that is given not to divide the righteous from sinners (*who are we to cast the first stone?*), but to give us a center (*nothing has changed since Genesis 2*) for a wonderful part of life that God has created for us (for us!), that we in all kinds of ways have messed up big time. The seventh Commandment: an affirmation of marriage – one man, one woman covenanted together to be faithful for life. Faithful Marriage: a gift of God.

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